



## *Captain Reilly—Inspirational Battery Commander*

by Colonel (Retired) Robert M. Stegmaier

**T**he date was 6 August 1900; the setting was the Boxer Rebellion in China. America's Fourteenth Infantry was fighting on the far side of the Pei Ho River and needed close artillery support. On the near side of the stream, Captain Henry J. Reilly, Commanding Officer of Light Battery F, Fifth Artillery Regiment received the mission and sprang into action. To Reilly's dismay, a Russian infantry unit blocked his battery's passage across the river bridge. Reilly immediately reported to the Russian commander and requested permission to pass through. The reply was a stubborn "Nyet." Calmly, the experienced American leader looked across the river, assessed the continued urgency of the situation, and turned his horse to face the waiting battery. Without hesitation, he gave the arm signal to advance. As his unit approached the bridge, he commanded, "Gallop, ho!" The Czar's men hit the ditches and bridge railings as the "artillery went rolling along." The American infantry soon

received the timely and effective fire support it needed.

To Reilly, only results counted. His well-known philosophy was: "Gentlemen, there must never be anything to explain in the battery." An artilleryman for 36 years, Reilly had risen from the ranks during the Civil War. In fact, he had received a battlefield commission for gallantry in action. His unit—Light Battery F, Fifth Regiment—had performed heroically in the bloody battles of Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Malvern Hill, and Petersburg.

Yet despite an outstanding reputation earned in four wars—the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, the Filipino Insurrection, and the Boxer Rebellion—as well as 3 decades of remarkable service Reilly never reached the rank of major. Ironically, he may well have achieved higher rank had he sought a transfer to another branch. But like his famous mentor, Major General Henry J. Hunt, Reilly saw his life as centered on the

artillery. To him, the Fifth Regiment was home, and there were only three field grade positions in that outfit. Furthermore, promotion was possible only within the assigned regiment; and there was no mandatory retirement age. As the song "Benny Havens, Oh!" so dolefully lamented: "Promotion's very slow."

Reilly, like so many other long-term soldiers, was something of a fatalist not only about promotion but also about life in general. He often contended, "There's no use dodging, you will be hit when your body and the bullets are at the same place at the same time, and that's the only rule there is to [my] 18 or 20 engagements without being wounded."

But Reilly's fatalism did not make him complacent. From subordinates, officers, and enlisted men alike, he demanded excellence. When his men performed outstanding services, he was the first to give official commendation. When they did not deliver, he let them know in the clearest of terms.

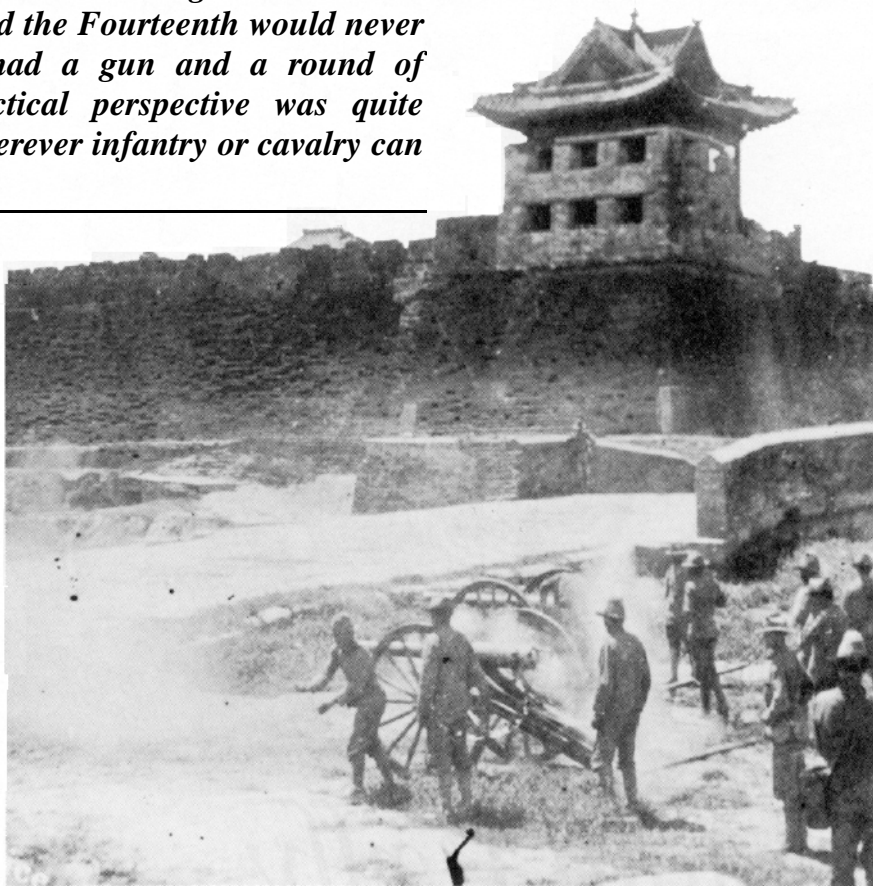
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Reilly's quest for excellence also extended to his relationship with the supported maneuver unit. To him close coordination between the supported infantry and Battery F was critical, and the infantry reciprocated. In the Fourteenth Infantry there was a boast that "no gun of Reilly's would ever be lost as long as there was a squad of the Fourteenth left, and the Fourteenth would never go under as long as Reilly had a gun and a round of ammunition left." Reilly's tactical perspective was quite simple: "These guns can go wherever infantry or cavalry can go."

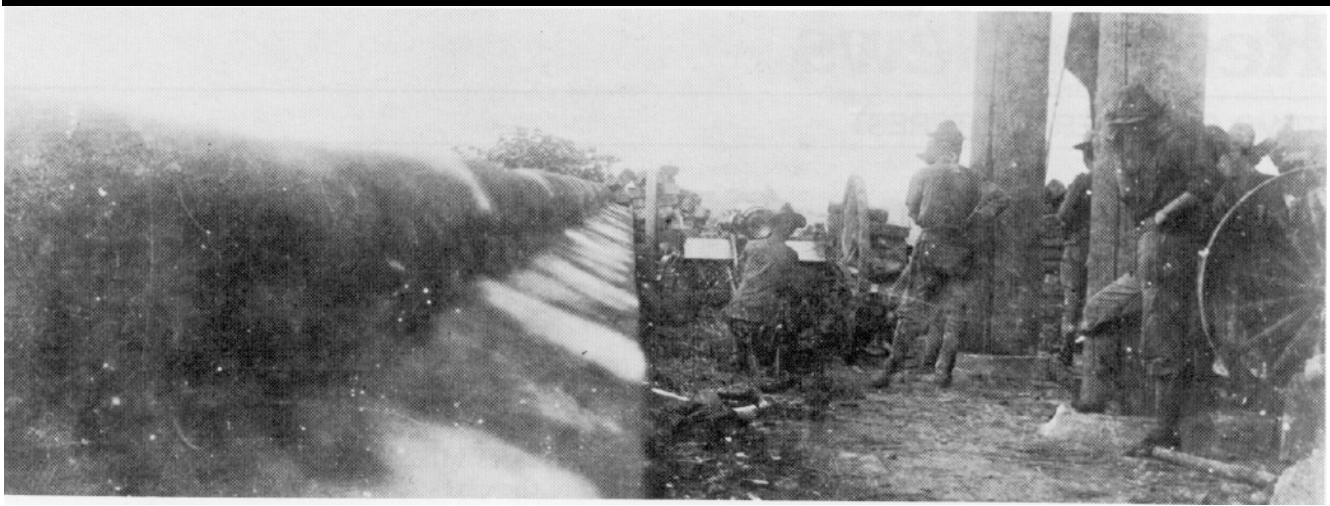
When senior leaders cited Battery F for its actions in the Philippines, Reilly shared credit for the honors with his lieutenants: First Lieutenant Charles P. Summerall (later Chief of Staff, US Army), First Lieutenant Louis R. Burgess (later Commanding General, 31st Artillery Brigade during World War I), and Second Lieutenant Manus McCloskey (later Commanding General, 12th Field Artillery in World War I). As a result of such honors accorded Battery F, the Army gave Battery F the Boxer Rebellion



**Battery F in action at the Tung-Pien Gate at the junction of the Chinese and Tartar cities.**



**LT C.P. Summerall's platoon firing through the gate of the first wall of the imperial city of Peking.**



**Guns of Reilly's Battery F on the wall above the Chien-Men Gate, enfilading the wall between the Chinese and the Tartar cities.**

mission. The objective of this international effort was the relief of the besieged Legation Row in Peking. Troops from Russia, France, England, Japan, and the United States were allied in the rescue effort.

After Reilly's crossing of the Pei Ho River, the international forces moved rapidly toward Peking. In a subsequent council of war, the combined leaders planned to mount a final assault on the Chinese defenses on 15 August. But, hoping to garner the glory of being first into Peking, the Russians attacked prematurely on 14 August. The Chinese resistance to the unilateral Muscovite action was bitter; the attack was stopped cold.

The other allied forces including Battery F soon joined the attack. Burgess's platoon went into action about 3,200 yards from the Imperial City walls. Its supporting firepower enabled the Fourteenth Infantry to plant the "Stars and Stripes" upon the wall. Summerall's cannoneers knocked down a pagoda filled with Chinese defenders, and other elements of the Battery blasted open a city gate for the Fourteenth Infantrymen. Legation Row was freed—and none too soon. As one inhabitant stated: "We were down to our last meal of pony meat. . . ."

The battle, however, did not end with the rescue of the legations. The Chinese retreated to the inner walls of the Forbidden City and mounted another defense. On 15 August, four guns of Battery F stood atop a wall commanding the Shun-chun gate, 1 mile away. Characteristically, Captain Reilly was in the forefront of the battle. He continuously directed fire adjustments; and under the impact of the battering shells, the walls of the Forbidden City began to tumble.



Photos courtesy Fort Sill Museum Archives

**Reilly's Battery F, 5th US Artillery in action against Chinese troops at Pei-Tsang, China.**

Word came that the American infantry was about to assault the walls. In response, two guns under the command of Lieutenant Summerall raced forward to provide close support.

Captain Reilly would have been proud to see those guns dashing along. He would have been prouder still to see Lieutenant Summerall calmly walk up to the City's gate amidst concentrated Chinese rifle fire and mark in chalk an "X" as the target for his guns. But fate interrupted, and Battery F's victory proved bitter. A Chinese bullet

and Captain Reilly had arrived at the same place, at the same time. Mortally wounded, Reilly fell unconscious; the gallant captain soon died in his first sergeant's arms. But he died as he would have chosen—with every section of his splendid battery in action and accomplishing their assigned tasks. Captain Reilly, a proud and dedicated battery commander, passed into history—a legend forever to be remembered and a courageous figure to serve as an example for all future Redleg leaders.



**Colonel (Retired) Robert M. Stegmaier received his commission in the Quartermaster branch upon graduation from the United States Military Academy in 1937. During his tenure as a quartermaster officer, he served in Germany, Korea, Peru, and the United States. He also served with the G3 Section at the Pentagon and commanded the 32d and 2d Quartermaster Groups. Upon his retirement at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1965, Colonel Stegmaier adopted the Field Artillery. He has published many articles on famous field artillerymen. Currently, he resides in Sun City, Arizona.**